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HON 407U: Spatial Regimes and Racial Formations

Professor Jenks

Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb

Author: Leland T. Saito

Book Review/Final Draft

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Review of *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb*

In this review of *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb*¹ by Leland Saito, I discuss and analyze Saito's argument, and his use of supporting evidence. I also discuss the fit between the argument and evidence, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of his sources, methods, and interpretation. In doing so, I situate Saito's work into context with similar works examining the relationship between spatial practices and racial formation.

Leland Saito is Associate Professor of Sociology and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California.² His work on race and politics takes a sociological perspective. The geographical location which Saito closely researches and examines is the San Gabriel Valley region of Los Angeles County. In particular, he focuses on the cities of Monterey

¹ Saito, Leland. *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

² "Department of American Studies and Ethnicity: Leland Saito". University of Southern California College of Arts and Letters. May 5th, 2009
<http://college.usc.edu/ase/people/faculty_display.cfm?Person_ID=1003665>.

Park, Alhambra, San Gabriel, and Rosemead. Starting in the 1960s, these four cities experienced the fastest-growing Asian American populations. Saito argues that Latinos and Asian Americans became aware of the racial discrimination that whites inflicted upon them starting in the 1960s, and adopted political activist movements as a means of resistance to negotiate the meanings and consequences of race. He describes the cultural construction of ethnic identities and the development of political alliances among the residents of the area. Saito further argues that there exists a connection between whiteness and the construction of identities among racial minorities and the use of those identities in politics. The connection consists of a notion of a white racial privilege, proactive movements for racial equality by Asians and Latinos, and the panethnic identities formed in the process among Asians, Asian Americans, and Latinos through alliances and community organization. Throughout his book, Saito analyzes the conflicts among the various ethnic groups in the San Gabriel Valley and discusses the residents' reactions and methods of coping with the conflicts. In doing so, he describes what the events reveal about the construction of panethnic identities.

Saito's work flows in a linear progression and chronologically outlines events in the region. He begins by discussing the trends and growth of immigrants from Asia as well as a rise in the Asian American population in the region, and then moves to discuss white racial privilege and discriminatory acts by white Americans against the influx of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Next, he discusses how discrimination lead Asian Americans to take a more active role in local and state politics and the political conflicts and alliances that resulted. He then explores the initial antagonistic relationships between Asians and Latinos and the alliances that eventually formed because of shared political interests. Finally, he discusses the case of

redistricting in the region and the cooperation among Asians, Asian Americans, and Latinos who assembled to fight for common issues.

Prior to the 1965 Immigration Act, immigration to the U.S. was highly restricted and regulated. Policies which limited immigration included the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907-08, Californian Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920, and Criminal Proceedings Act, all of which acted in favor of privileged whites and against Asian immigrants.³ Another pressing issue was that of residential segregation and housing discrimination. This slowly declined due to economic forces and legal challenges; thus, Monterey Park started transitioning from an area dominated by whites to a multiracial city in the 1960s and featured more open housing access and a growing number of Asian Americans elected into city council.

After 1965, immigrants started to enter the U.S., particularly to Los Angeles because of its large, diverse economy and long-standing ethnic populations.⁴ Saito describes the San Gabriel Valley as a desirable area for both Asian Americans and Latino immigrants. It is depicted as a focal point for transnational business. Immigrants were drawn to the location of the San Gabriel Valley in part because it was fifteen minutes away from downtown Los Angeles. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, a slow growth movement (that opposed growth) gained strength in Monterey Park. During this time, closures of familiar stores as well as changes in lifestyle occurred for residents. Increased urbanization led to an increase in pollution and a

³ Saito p. 27

⁴ Saito p. 18

disappearance of parks. Furthermore, a Residents Association of Monterey Park⁵ (RAMP) formed in favor of the slow growth movement and voiced strong anti-immigrant views.

In elaborating on the slow growth movement, Saito discusses the notion of reasserting whiteness, White racial privilege, and how, in many studies of race, Whites are often left unexamined for they are typically viewed as the “norm.” As an example of this practice in Monterey Park, Saito looks at the transformation of history and architecture. He analyzes the reconstruction and remodeling of Atlantic Square, a shopping mall in Monterey Park. He focuses on the processes through which residents, developers, and elected officials made decisions about architecture and use. The Arroyo Group, one of the companies hired by the city to develop plans for the business districts, planned to enfold space within “our Anglo culture” and neglected new influences that Asian Americans and other ethnic groups brought to the area. Whites and Latinos wanted it to be a place reflecting the history of the area opposed to what they viewed as a Chinese mini-mall. Because of the large influx of Chinese immigrants, they felt intimidated by the influence and presence of the Chinese and did not want that culture to be reflected in the new architecture. Mexicans and Mexican Americans thus bounded together with Whites to counter the influence of the Chinese. A Spanish theme had been suggested, but the adoption of a Mediterranean theme for Atlantic Square was finally implemented. The term “Mediterranean,” with its European roots, implied a less threatening and dominating implementation than a pure Spanish theme.

The adoption of a “Mediterranean” design reveals the spatial practices of appropriation of space as well as production of space. The complete remodel of Atlantic Square involved a new

⁵ Saito p. 37

use of the land, as well as social networks of people to meet and decide on the best design of the space. The project included a total revamping and creation of a new territorial infrastructure which complied with the chosen “Mediterranean” theme. Because of the theme and design chosen for the remodeling project, Saito notes David Roediger’s work on the construction of whiteness which argues that the notion of whiteness supports a racial hierarchy.⁶ The Mediterranean theme supports that racial hierarchy since its name infers whiteness while not explicitly stating it.

In his 1990s examination of the range of issues for Asian American politics including campaign financing, voting patterns, gender, political partisanship, and class, Saito mentions the return of ‘Yellow Peril’ in a different form. Originally, the term “Yellow Peril” depicted the fear and resistance by whites to mass Asian immigration to the United States. In this section of his book, Saito discusses illegal donations from Asians and Asian Americans to support other Asian American candidates running for office being highlighted in news media, whereas similar acts by Whites generally go unnoticed. Saito discusses the rise in hate crimes targeting Asian Americans and further describes how that impacted Asian American identity and political mobilization. Divisions emerged between Japanese and Chinese immigrants, as well as between immigrants and the native born Asian Americans. Many issues arose that went beyond class interests and united voters along ethnic and racial lines. These included anti-Asian hate crimes, English-only ordinances, attacks against immigrants by city council members, and the treatment of Asian Americans as outsiders. The discrimination and commonalities they experienced outweighed the divisions, and enabled the formation of panethnic political coalitions based on common interests. After the mid-1980s, more Asian American political organizations established networks and a

⁶ Saito p. 51

political base. Many organizations in Los Angeles formed, including the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, various Asian service organizations, and grass roots organizations.

Saito also discusses the political involvement of Asian and Latina women. Starting in the 1970s and into the 1980s, women in the San Gabriel Valley have taken more leadership positions, beginning with the school board. These positions have been stepping stones for women to move up in the political arena where they were able to break down various stereotypes regarding minorities involved in politics. Asian American and Latina women were thus also able to gain stronger political positions which acted to strengthen the Asian American and Latino political bases in the area.

Because of their shared struggles, Latinos and Asian Americans in the 1980s began to join together against racialized hierarchies and white privilege. Cooperative efforts emerged between Asian Americans and Latinos when similar racial and class positions developed, creating shared circumstances and interests. Since both groups faced similar acts of racial discrimination, they joined to provide resources for community activists in constructing partnerships across racial lines in labor organizing and political mobilization. Saito argues that interracial alliances formed as the result of established political groups adopting the same goals, and acting to create an institutional base for negotiations among various organizations. He states that the growing organizational scale of politics acts as a driving force for construction of panethnic identities and interracial alliances.

An example of the growing organizational scale involved the alliance between Latinos and Asian Americans to voice their demands on redistricting in the San Gabriel Valley. With the case of redistricting, both groups realized that the state legislature was more interested in creating districts to ensure incumbents' reelection than protecting the political rights of ethnic

communities. Together, the groups worked to devise a plan which they could all support. They declared goals to create mutually beneficial electoral districts and put aside their differences in order to focus on common issues.

Saito explains how redistricting demonstrates the way in which government policies have defined racial categories and the social, political, and economic implications of that process. The redistricting of the San Gabriel Valley involved four major factors dealing with the interracial ties between Asian Americans and Latinos. First, both groups had similar histories of facing discrimination. Secondly, both groups shared common interests and concerns in subjects such as immigration legislation, bilingual education, discrimination, hate crimes, and employment. Both groups realized each others' strengths and the stronger impact that could be made if joining together in alliance and combining their populations to strengthen their political influence. Latino organizations had political and legal knowledge acquired through landmark court victories, and Asian Americans had a growing population and the ability to fundraise greater amounts of money and provide resources. Finally, Latinos and Asian Americans had a history of working together. For instance, in the labor and agricultural market, cross cultural cooperative efforts for laborers and farmers emerged. This led to the formation of the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association, the first agricultural union formed by racial minorities.⁷

To conclude his book, Saito states that racialized common experiences are still present among minorities. How these experiences are dealt with is part of the process of constructing racial and ethnic identities. Where whiteness in other parts of the U.S. is still uncontested, San Gabriel Valley is a special case in which interracial alliances are being formed to dispute white

⁷ Saito p. 129.

racial hierarchies and mobilize in political issues. Saito argues that the cultural content of ethnicity is continuously transformed as it is informed by historical and current events and used to support political goals. He also emphasizes how identities are highly situational and multilayered.

In the construction of this book, Saito employs various research methods and analyze a variety of sources. These sources directly relate to his background in sociology, American studies and ethnicity. This includes ethnography in the form of participant observation and interviews (particularly from 1988 to 1992), as well as electoral and statistical evidence such as two exit polls of Monterey Park City Council elections, the 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census, candidate campaign contribution statements, and election results. The sources which he uses relate to his focus on political action and training in sociology. Although Saito includes graphs and charts to visually indicate the ethnic populations and voting statistics in cities in the San Gabriel Valley, he does not include any visual representations of the cities studied and how the area of each city is structured. This element is lacking in the sources that Saito presents in the book. Drawing from the sources he did use; however, Saito's work exemplifies a sociological-political methodology of looking at race.

Saito also draws upon the work of other scholars to frame his own arguments and ideas. He references many other scholars such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant, sociologists who developed the theory of racial formation. He also references other scholars looking at the notion of the cultural construction of race and political alliances. These scholars include Aldon Morris and Carol Mueller, Hank Johnston, Enrique Larana, Joseph Gusfield, Bert Klandermans, Raphael Sonenshein, Lisa Lowe, and Carole Uhlaner among others. These scholars and their work make

up the discourse community examining the cultural construction of race and ethnicity and its relation to politics.

Robert Self's book, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*⁸, relates to Saito's work in that it also deals with the growth of the suburbs with an influx of new immigrants, and a growing political scene. Self's analysis traces the city of Oakland during World War II until the 1960s and notes the interactions between blacks and whites. He depicts the racial diversity, and struggle for economic rights by Black Americans and the rise in political activity. This included labor movements, radical movements and the rise in power of the Black Panther Party, an African-American group which formed in support of the Black Power Movement. Although Saito and Self both analyze similar topics dealing with suburbanization and rise in political culture, they look at two uniquely different ethnic groups—Self tracking the interactions between African Americans and Americans, and Saito dealing with racial conflicts and alliances among Asians, Latinos, and Americans. Furthermore, Self ends his analysis of Oakland and surrounding cities in the 1960s, whereas Saito picks up his analysis of the San Gabriel Valley starting in the 1960s going into the 1990s.

In Kay Anderson's book, *Vancouver's Chinatown*⁹, her depiction of the Chinatown in Vancouver parallels some of the attributes of the remodeling of Atlantic Square in Monterey Park. Anderson describes the changing representation of Chinatown from negative connotations given in the prewar period to positive connotations illustrated in the postwar period. Both areas

⁸ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

⁹ Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991.

were constructed by a White community located within an ethnic space. The areas show the cultural hegemony that can develop in a space over time, and thus contribute to the same discourse community.

To conclude, Saito describes the connection of shared histories, the cultural construction of racial identities, and building interracial alliances. Saito focuses on the construction of the Asian American in the presence of other ethnicities in the geographic region of the San Gabriel Valley. Furthermore, Saito discusses the Latinos present in the same region and how the formation of their panethnic identity occurs concurrently with that of the Asian Americans. These panethnic political identities fit into Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation for they can be created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.¹⁰ In the San Gabriel region, these panethnic identities are not fixed or stable and constantly change from events that Saito depicts in his work.

¹⁰ Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States (2nd edition)*. Routledge, 1994. P. 55